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SITUATION REPORT

POLAND

The situation in Poland has deteriorated and will become much worse if a preliminary accord on free trade unions collapses.

Strike leaders in Gdansk are holding firm to their demands for free trade unions, and sympathy strikes continue to spread, raising the real possibility of a nationwide general strike.

With few options left, the regime yesterday was considering an agreement on free unions that in effect would be a victory for the workers. The agreement could still collapse, however, escalating the crisis even further. While the situation is not yet irretrievable, the chances for mutual miscalculation have increased significantly and the time available for reaching compromise is growing short.

New Pressure

The strikes have spread to Poland's mining and industrial heartland of Silesia, despite the injunction on Thursday of Gdansk strike leader Walesa that workers outside the Baltic Coast remain on the job for at least several days.

The prospect of a nationwide strike--more real now than at any time since the crisis in Gdansk began more than two weeks ago--has increased pressure considerably on the regime to resolve quickly the impasse in Gdansk. This could most readily be done, of course, by the regime agreeing to strikers' demands for free trade unions. This may now be close to happening. The government's expert-level negotiators have agreed to the existence of independent and autonomous trade unions separate from the official trade unions. The strikers have, for their part, reportedly pledged to support the constitution and its provisions that Poland is a socialist state and that the party is the leading force.

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Approved for Release
Date AUG 1999

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30 August 1980

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The attraction for both the Polish and Soviet regimes of such an arrangement is that it would buy time and would avoid other options--including the use of force--that carry greater risks and consequences.

Such an agreement, however, could be difficult to sell to either the Polish or Soviet leadership. Previous Communist regimes in Poland have successfully avoided implementing promised reforms, but the present leadership might feel that it could not avoid implementing concessions this time, even though the measures would lead to greater pluralism and a weakening of its status and role in Polish society. This also would be the primary Soviet concern. The regime also realizes that its own weakness and the new sense of worker power would make very difficult any reneging on its promise. The Soviets would fear the impact on other East European countries.

Regime's Options

Strike leaders in Gdansk are publicly saying that agreement is near, and the collapse of any preliminary accord would leave the regime with few attractive options. It could:

- Continue efforts to pressure strike leaders into compromise by a mixture of threats and blandishments and by demonstrating that the strikes could prompt a Soviet military intervention. Such reminders in the past two weeks have had little impact--probably because the Soviets have not made menacing gestures.
- Offer party leader Gierek as a scapegoat. The strikers' indifferent reaction to the massive personnel changes last Sunday indicates that they want changes in policy, not personnel. Gierek's removal, moreover, would leave his successor with the same problems, could raise concerns in Moscow, and would remove from the scene the person who might be in the best position to defend regime concessions to the Soviets.

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- Use force. The practical problem of using force is that the strikes are so widespread that force could not be concentrated effectively. The use of force without first setting the correct propaganda stage carries the real risk of triggering a national outburst. The regime may no longer feel confident that it can count on its security forces, including the military, to quash strikers who enjoy a good deal of sympathy throughout the country.

The Church

Church leaders may have eroded some of their credibility by appearing to side too closely with the regime and against the strikers. Nevertheless, it remains the one institution that has the prestige and influence to prevent a nationwide strike.

Although there are limits on what the Church is prepared to do, its leaders realistically see no other course for Poland than a Communist one and unquestionably prefer a Communist Poland to a Soviet military occupation.

Cardinal Wyszynski could privately counsel the strike leaders in Gdansk to end their strikes. He could even make a dramatic personal appearance. Pope John Paul II could personally--or through an emissary--appeal for a return to work in the interests of the Polish nation. Such appeals might be most effective when strikers came to believe the situation had clearly deteriorated.

Miscalculation

A persistent and growing danger in the current atmosphere is that of miscalculation by one or all of the parties. The regime's hollow rhetoric and slogans of imminent national catastrophe have not worked and are probably ignored by many--including the strikers and the Church--who do not yet see the dangers in the situation. Conditioned by such rhetoric, they may not recognize the point at which a national catastrophe--such as a Soviet intervention--is at hand.

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